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ABSTRACT

In the last 15 years, colleges and universities Have sought creative ways to encourage the study of second languages and to add an international dimension to the college curriculum. More extensive international exchange, higher language enrollments, and more widespread inclusion of language study as a college entrance requirement have resulted. A federal study of a diverse group of eight major United States-based international corporations employing over 400,000 worldwide investigated employer expectations and preferences of recent college graduates' language skills and international knowledge. It was found that: expectations differ significantly by industry, corporate culture, and nature of the entry-level job; prospective employees' claims of skills and knowledge are not usually validated in the recruitment process; newly-hired graduates are not typically involved in international operations or accounts for several years; international knowledge expected of those in liaison with overseas legal counsel and accountants is not well specified, and corporations rely heavily on local expertise overseas; second language proficiency is beginning to be valued more highly; human resource officers have mixed feelings about graduates' skills; and recent emphasis on multicultural education is viewed as positive preparation. It is concluded that overall, rather than specialized, internationalization of the college curriculum is desirable. Contains 12 references. (MSE)

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Education Research Report

What Employers Expect of College Graduates: International knowledge and Second Language Skills

Clifford Adelman

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Education

Research Report

What Employers Expect of College Graduates: International Knowledge and Second Language Skills

Since the 1979 report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, *Strength Through Wisdom*, U.S. colleges and universities have sought creative ways to encourage the study of languages other than English and to add international dimensions to the undergraduate curriculum (Lambert 1989). In recent years, this effort has been given a boost by requirements for the study of non-Western culture, history, geography, and politics in many undergraduate programs. In the 1980s, the principal argument for these efforts was the increasingly competitive global economy. In the 1990s, the argument is part of a larger normative appeal for student understanding of a multicultural society and world.

Beyond both these utilitarian and normative arguments has been a higher volume of international student exchange, involving not only that between the United States and other countries, but also regional exchanges of students, for example, in the European Community and the Pacific Rim (Zikopoulos 1989; UNESCO 1989; Ebuchi 1989).

The rhetoric and efforts in the United States are now showing results. High school foreign language course enrollments have risen considerably in recent years. Between 1982 and 1990, for example, course enrollments in public secondary schools rose 46 percent, and the proportion of public secondary school students studying languages other than English increased from 23 percent to 38 percent (Draper 1991). Foreign language study is now an entrance requirement in 26 percent of U.S. colleges and universities (versus 14 percent in 1982–83) and a degree requirement in 58 percent (versus 47 percent a decade ago) (Brod and Lapointe 1989). Bachelor's degrees awarded annually in languages other than English have increased 28 percent (to 12,100) over the past decade, more than twice the increase in overall bachelor's degrees (Snyder 1993). As for increases in college student course-taking in international fields, the jury is out until the major national college transcript sample covering 1982–1993 is fully coded and released this year. But anecdotal evidence suggests an upsurge.

What Do Employers Value?

Do U.S. employers, particularly those with large international operations, value this education and training when they recruit and hire recent college graduates? How do they use the knowledge and skill investments students make in international and second language study? To what extent do they sponsor additional education in international affairs or languages other than English for their employees? These questions have been explored only occasionally

(Hayden and Koepplin 1980; Inman 1980; Fixman 1990; Lambert 1990), and never with large samples of employers. In a 1989–90 survey of the recruiting practices of 479 employers (74 percent in the private sector), for example, only 1 question out of 11 concerning the experience and education of potential employees even touched on these matters: "study abroad" was one of eight "undergraduate performance factors" recruiters rated. From the responses to that question, we learn that only 13 percent of private sector employers judged study abroad to be a significant plus for college graduates (Scheetz 1990).

To begin answering these questions in the last years of the 20th century, the Office of Research designed and commissioned an indepth case study of eight major U.S.-based international corporations employing over 400,000 people worldwide (100,000 outside the United States). In a similar small group case study, Fixman (1990) used nine corporations, but of different sizes, and focused wholly on foreign language issues.

The eight corporations in our case study were selected to reflect diverse industries: commercial banking, investment banking, electronics manufacturing, aircraft manufacturing, petroleum and petrochemicals production, agriculture and agricultural commodities, personal products manufacturing, and telecommunications. The individuals interviewed at the corporations held titles such as director of human resources, director of international personnel, or chief college recruiting officer. Individuals in these positions tend to know more about what really happens in recruitment, training, and utilization of employees than those in more senior managerial roles.

Conclusions

The following conclusions from this study should be regarded as hypotheses since the sample of employers was small. The findings represent the state of recruitment and utilization at only these eight firms and cannot be generalized to U.S. private sector employers as a whole.

- **Expectations for recent college graduates differ significantly by industry, corporate culture, and the nature of the entry-level job.** Banking and telecommunications firms were more likely than others to expect recent college graduates to have a good understanding of international affairs. Those in agriculture and investment banking were most responsive to prospective employees with skills in languages other than English. With the exception of one firm that has adopted a "global perspective" for all its employees, recruitment of engineers and technical workers emphasizes neither international knowledge nor bilingualism.

- **Claims made by prospective employees about their international knowledge or skill in a language other than English are not usually validated in the recruitment process.** Only three of the eight firms required prospective employees who claimed skill in a language other than English to conduct some of their interviews in that language. Only one firm claimed to read college transcripts line-by-line to determine the nature and extent of an applicant's training in international matters.

- **Newly hired U.S. college graduates are not typically involved in international operations or accounts for several years after joining a firm.** This finding is true even of those employees in sales operations, where the use of languages is most frequently required. The telecommunications firm was an exception to this rule. Employers in financial services prefer recruiting foreign nationals attending U.S. universities, training them in the business, and returning them to corporate divisions in their home countries.

- **The international knowledge expected of those responsible for liaison with overseas legal counsel and accountants is not well specified, and U.S. corporations rely heavily on overseas legal and accounting firms to provide "local knowledge."** The principal U.S.-based liaison officers are senior managers, who are expected to acquire a broad understanding—including cultural, political, economic, legal, and regulatory matters—of the countries in which they are responsible for overseeing operations. One respondent clarified the degree of knowledge required by observing that liaison officers "need to know enough to be able to ask the right questions, but foreign contractors will have the answers to both the asked and the unasked questions."

- **While bilingualism is not typically stressed in hiring, U.S. corporations are beginning to value second language proficiency more highly.** Seven of the eight firms maintain personnel data bases that include information about employees' second language skills and training. Five of the eight subsidize foreign language training for any employee who requests it, and all eight provide language and culture training to U.S. citizens (and their families) assigned overseas. How well employees learn second languages in these programs is not well documented; the documentation most often consists of informal assessments provided to supervisors by language instructors.

- **Human resource officers have a mixed view of recent college graduates' abilities to perform effectively in a global economy.** Three of the eight officers elaborated by noting that recent college graduates who are U.S. citizens mistake their knowledge of a country's history or geography for an understanding of how to do business there and have a narrow conception of international affairs. Other respondents indicated, however, that our colleges and universities do a creditable job educating foreign nationals.

- **Recent emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in college curricula and cultural activities is seen as positive preparation for work in an economy without borders.** Cultural sensitivity and a demonstrable ability to act differently in different countries are qualities that employers are recognizing as extremely valuable in their international—as well as domestic—operations. They need and want employees who can do it, not merely talk about it. At the same time, though, these aspects of undergraduate education are regarded as secondary to the technical knowledge necessary to perform in specific corporate roles (e.g., engineer, account manager, computer systems manager).

Message to Students and Colleges

The eight employers may not be representative, but enough of them urged students to acquire second language skills, particularly in less-commonly-taught languages of Russian, Chinese, and Japanese, to warrant notice. Students should also seek multicultural knowledge and experiences; they will be more productive workers as a result.

As for college curriculum, the most notable view is that international study should not be considered a separate specialization as much as a component of academic and occupational training programs. "Internationalizing the curriculum," a rallying cry of campus and organization leaders fully invested in realizing the vision of the 1979 President's Commission, may have much to recommend it in the global economy.

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